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ABSTRACT

The problems of teachers as they deal with the rapid changes brought about by Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act) and other legislation have largely been ignored. The teaching profession is considered one of the most potentially stressful occupations in the world (along with air traffic controllers and surgeons). While good mental health is essential, research reveals that many cannot cope with the stress of their profession and "burnout" (a response to unchecked stress) is occurring. Burn-out can range from short-lived fatigue to physical ailments such as chronic back pain and ulcers. Teachers become physically, emotionally, and attitudinally exhausted. In a survey of teachers, 84% responded that they believed there are health hazards in teaching, with stress pinpointed as the major force affecting their health. The concept of an individualized educational plan has led many parents to believe that prior to P.L. 94-142 there were no specific goals, often placing teachers in adversarial roles which only increase their sense of frustration and isolation. (Author/PHR)

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"TEACHER" the Forgotten Component of the IEP

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As the second year of implementing Public Law 94-142 comes to a close, it appears the "educational dust" is beginning to settle. Special education professionals nationally continue to strive to comply with the letter and most important, the spirit of this educational directive.

Historically, past legislative packages that have attempted to address shortcomings of public education could only be evaluated after years of experience (i.e. P.L. 89-10, P.L. 93-380). Public Law 94-142, however, has had an immediate impact in the definition and provision of services for exceptional children.

When one carefully examines the origin of P.L. 94-142 it is important to note the reasons for its enactment. The early 1970's saw the initiation of a large body of specific case law dealing with the principle of the right to education (PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia).

The impact of these litigated cases raised public awareness and responsibility for meeting the diverse and complex needs of exceptional children. By 1972, thirty five states had specific statutes enacted to meet the challenge of addressing the needs of handi-

capped children. By 1975, this dramatically increased to 48 states or 96 per cent of our citizenry were protected and provided specific rights with regard to special education. It is also interesting to note that in this same year (1975), 22 states had specific language that attempted to provide "integration" for handicapped children.

With this type of rapid growth and increased committment to special children, one might wonder and/or question the rationale of implementing a "master plan" such as P.L. 94-142.

Through the comprehensive efforts of several child advocacy groups, public awareness of the needs of exceptional children was put into perspective. Congress in its review of many of the findings of the Children's Defense Fund, the House Subcommittee on the Handicapped along with the Senate Subcommittee on the Handicapped provided some rather disillusioning information.

* Over 1.75 million handicapped children in the United States were still being totally excluded from receiving a public education solely on the basis of their handicaps.

* Over half of the estimated handicapped population in this country was not receiving the appropriate educational services

they needed or were entitled to.

* Many handicapped children were still being inappropriately placed in educational settings because their handicaps were undetected or because of a violation of their individual rights.

This testimony led Congress to conclude that even though federal and state judicial and legislative actions had brought about substantial progress in providing educational services for the handicapped, there remained the need for a greater involvement of the Federal government. This effort/involvement came with the promulgation of Public Law 94-142 (Zettel and Weintraub 1978).

Aside from further legislation and newly defined accountability, the professional educator continues to be confronted with challenges and impediments from other sources.

The continuing onslaught from the media that constantly reminds us of the increase in vandelism and teacher directed violence further expands and complicates the total experience of the special educator.

Nationally, the topic of teacher tolerance for never ending change, expectations and stricter accountability has led to an increased awareness of the mental health of the special educator.

The importance of teacher's mental health may be so obvious that justification beyond the personal loss to these once idealistic leaders of children would seem unnecessary. However, cumulative results of research help clarify some interesting components of teacher mental health that relate to providing services to children.

The Encyclopedia of Education mentions three "personal characteristics of the teacher-- his expectations (Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1968); sources of satisfaction (Wayson 1966); the receptivity to change (Bridge and Reynolds 1968) which are of great significance to success in the classroom, sometimes even more important than the teacher's intellectual competence and personal skill" (Encyclopedia of Education).

Research also indicates that especially in relating to the specialized needs of the emotionally disturbed and socially maladjusted, the teacher's

personal attributes are at least as important as professional competencies (Scheuer 1971).

The profession of teaching is indeed a twofold experience. It is unique with respect to needs fulfillment and can offer the practitioner overwhelming enjoyment and self-satisfaction. Unfortunately at times, teaching can become a destructive occupation in which the special educator faces countless obstacles and problems. Teachers, along with air traffic controllers and surgeons are considered three of the most potentially stressful occupations in the world (Hunter 1977).

The pressure of having to teach, mold and shape handicapped children day after day and continually do this with motivation, calmness and variety eventually can affect the mental health of the educator trying to achieve these goals.

Good mental health on the part of the teacher is considered to be of the utmost importance in the learning situation. Educators would agree that "teacher personality" and mental health are as important as the mastery of the subject and method of presentation.

A shocking report of research done in 1977 points to serious concern. Researchers felt that the helping professional does not know how to deal with the stress and strain of their profession. It was felt that these professionals were, in increasing numbers, unable to maintain their original committment.

In order to deal with the problems and the stress, professionals are developing patterns of cynisism and a dehumanizing perception of the students they work with. This transition has slowly created a decreased awareness of the limitless human attribute (Maslach and Pines 1977).

This type pf research has shocking and potentially dangerous cues to re-examine the issue of "burn-out" of the special educator.

The term burn-out has been coined to mean a response to "circuit overload" as a result of unchecked stress caused by the institution's impersonal and unyielding demands and the immediate environment in which teaching is done (Hendickson 1979).

When the topic of teacher burn-out is examined there appears to be many more questions than answers.

There appears to be three degrees of burn-out ranging from mild to severe. They have been defined as: First degree burn which is the mild short-lived

bouts of fatigue, irritability, worry and frustration. Second degree burn is moderate and similar to first degree burn, except that the discomfort lasts for two or three weeks. Third degree burn is the most severe because the problems are compounded by physical ailments such as chronic back pain, migraine headaches, ulcers, etc. There is increasing opinion that teacher burn-out is in many ways similar to the "combat neurosis" phenomenon (Michael 1978).

Although its effect varies from person to person, many teachers opt to "drop out" in name if not in fact. This phenomenon manifests as the feeling of easiness as the joy of teaching begins to permanently slip away. The teacher becomes physically, emotionally and attitudinally exhausted.

To compound this dilemma, most teachers experiencing burn-out have trouble recognizing the symptoms. Usually relying upon negative "crutches" to avoid the painful reality, many teachers feel alone and isolated.

This professional isolation is often defined as the feeling experienced by teachers that no one cares about them or their contribution to the school program. Teacher anxiety, antagonism and absenteeism are common for the professional at risk.

The impact of these common concerns were

investigated in 1976. A national magazine for elementary school teachers published the results of a readers survey under the catchy title, "Is Teaching Hazardous to Your Health?". Of the 9,000 respondents, 84% believed there are health hazards in teaching, with stress (tension - pressure) pinpointed as the major force affecting their health (Landsmann 1976).

Other sources adding to this concern has been proposed from a different perspective. One researcher saw the problem of "tired and frustrated teachers" stemming from demands being made by the public. An inevitable conflict between the teacher's and someone else's expectations in a society of many diverse values. Demands for teacher accountability for specific student learning, which may not be under the teacher's control, along with unrealistic expectations for individualized programs in a school setting more suited to standard expectations all breed dissatisfaction and guilt (Adams 1975).

Others question whether a public that has seen expectations and expenditures for public education rise in recent years will consider unforseen variables as teacher burn-out. The belief that the public

school can -- and must -- educate all children is deeply routed in America society. Teachers who are unable to make strides toward that goal, whatever burdens they face, can expect to find their woes mounting in years to come (Sarnoff 1978).

As previously mentioned, P.L. 94-142 was developed to meet many weaknesses of our past special education practices. It is ironic that "the teacher" is the forgotten component of the I.E.P., and has become the new "victim" of this innovation.

The professional contradiction of serving children in the least restrictive environment, casts the unfortunate connotation that special educators in their quest to assist handicapped children have been construed as "restricting kids". Special educators, who endorsed the passage of P.L. 94-142, have themselves been the subjects of restrictions and the projected image of not being professionally accountable. The concept of the I.E.P. has led many parents into thinking prior special educational efforts were planned and provided without specific goals and measures. Arbitrary time lines and the adversarial role that special educators find themselves in, continue to add to the magnitude of teacher burn-out.

It is hoped that these "growing pains" will soon be ameliorated and the committed professional can return to serving those special education children which started them on their idealistic quest.

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